

“SEARCHIN’ MY WEARIED MIND FOR DE DAWN OF LIFE”: CREATING A LITERARY  
AND CULTURAL IMAGINARY OF THE CARCERAL STATE

BY

HALEY ROSE FAULAND

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Approved by:

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Dr. Jerome Dotson

Department of Africana Studies

Abstract

The mass incarceration of African Americans in the United States is the product of generations of white hegemony and racial divide. The introduction of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment posed an obstacle for slaveowners, but legal loop holes maintained white economic status and racial order through the creation of a Carceral State. Carceral scholarship analyzes the systematic oppression of U.S. institutions with a top-down method, painting an incomplete picture. This project creates a literary imaginary of communities disproportionately affected by interactions with the Carceral State, giving their consciousness a human voice. The analysis of the violence and inhumanity through art will provide a comprehensive scrutiny of the United States prison system, while adding faces and stories to the scholarly research. By consuming this project, readers will comprehend the insidious ways the U.S. justice system has stifled the creativity and existence of people of color, how captives have separated consciousness from corporeal limitations to create beauty, and how generations of forced interaction with slavery and the Carceral State have shaped communities of color. This project seeks to add to Carceral scholarship from the ground floor to build a cultural history from the words and voices of the people it tends to forget.

Part One: Creating a Criminal

“Sittin’ behind a prison fence, servin’ time & daydreamin’ bout things dat make no kinda sense...to white folks,” Henry Lucas laments as he jots down his experiences of power and exploitation in prison.<sup>1</sup> In one simple phrase, Lucas ignites the intricacy of injustice he faces as a pawn of neoliberal reality. Michel Foucault, the famed French philosopher and thinker, captivated the intellectual community with his conceptualized landscape of the theory of power. Power is intangible, it is the blood that flows through a capillary for a specific physiological purpose, it is the corporeal being and its actions, it is the entrapment of the black body; Foucault utilized the panopticon prison structure to display the subtlety of power and the ability of those governing elites to manipulate it, thus forcibly exerting control, extracting visibility, and enforcing maximum production and efficiency from the imprisoned.<sup>2</sup> The imprisoned bodies of the panopticon drudge along, feuding internally for a sense of identity and humanity amongst the chaos of a system in shambles.

The modern world of mass incarceration is predicated upon the control and exploitation of marginalized groups of people—in fact, nearly half the incarcerated population in the United States is comprised of African Americans, egregiously disproportionate to the national population.<sup>3</sup> Consequentially, there exists a plethora of statistics on black crime, and a perceived societal association between blackness and criminality<sup>4</sup>; the panopticon of mass incarceration is the eye of the white man, who sees everything, creates criminality in the world of those he

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Lucas, in *Prose and Cons*, (New York: Pyramid Communications, Inc., 1976), 154.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 207-208.

<sup>3</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad, 1.

oppresses, and condemns the hegemonized to lives of second-class citizenship, becoming rich from the yield of their existence.

In order to analyze the implications of a complex apparatus of systematic oppression, one must build upon the historiography of intellectuals past and present, examine their findings closely, and draw new connections and conclusions. One such intellectual, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, examines the relationship between blackness and criminality, carefully illustrating insidious methods utilized by whites to restrict the rights of black people and condemn them to lives of destitution and subordination. After slavery was abolished and black people became enfranchised, a wave of panic flooded through the veins of white America; people who had been slave laborers just a short while before, now wielded the power that came with citizenship, which boiled the blood of ruling whites and sparked a desperate panic, wherein white critics and scientists created the ‘Negro Problem.’<sup>5</sup>

These scientists began to create data and research on the relationship between races, settling upon ideas that blackness was defined by savagery, natural underdevelopment, the inability to control sexual impulses, and intellectual inferiority.<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, a Harvard educated scientist, insinuated in 1884 the affinity between blackness and criminality, stating: “...the task of weaving these African threads of life into our society will be the greatest of all American problems.”<sup>7</sup> The strings of data and statistics that scientists like Shaler analyzed and distributed to the intellectual community were not based upon fact or scientific research, but upon the examination of black people through their own observation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Muhammad, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad, 16-18.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad, 21.

Fabricating opinion and manufacturing fact from their panopticon of power allowed white social scientists to design a connection between blackness and delinquency. Studies linking the two weighed heavily upon the creation of legislation to segregate, and the popular opinion was that the government had a duty to protect the white population from the criminality of blacks.<sup>9</sup> Black scholars like W.E.B. DuBois were quick to dismiss studies condemning blackness as awash with “myth, stereotype, and ignorance.” DuBois also relayed the importance of unification within the black community to educate and rise above the stereotype created by whites as a vessel of control and authority; he warned that if black people succumbed to the destiny created for them, that they would fall right into its hands.<sup>10</sup>

Decades later, in the wake of the growing Civil Rights Movement, whites yet again felt threatened by the call for equality amongst all human beings, so they created ‘law-and-order’ liberal rhetoric to connect civil disobedience with criminality.<sup>11</sup> As Michelle Alexander explains, there was an inherent racial bias, as the movement for equality and progress became a threat to white superiority and the ‘law-and-order’ of society.<sup>12</sup> As a result, extreme legislation against the Civil Rights Movement was advanced in the government, which was in reality vicious racism with a mask on.<sup>13</sup> However, the reality of the concept of law-and-order is not some grandiose vindication for heinous criminality, it is instead a messy, disorganized system that falsely accuses, misrepresents, and brutalizes those who have been thrust into it.<sup>14</sup> Even into the 1960s and 1970s, the criminalization of black people, paired alongside the idea that their culture and

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<sup>9</sup> Muhammad, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad, 66-67.

<sup>11</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2010), 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, 59.

existence as humans was inferior to white culture and existence was perpetuated with statistics and social studies.<sup>15</sup> The perpetuation of the notion that black culture was ‘subculture’ and that black poverty and crime were simply reflections of that contributed to the caste system which was responsible for keeping the black population imprisoned, physically and mentally.<sup>16</sup> Alexander demonstrates that techniques utilized for the subordination of black folks with social science and racial studies continued, but developed into a disguised system, wherein black culture and humanity was painted as going against law-and-order and the safety of the white community.

In addition to the criminalization of black culture and humanity, came the criminalization of black people in search of an ambiguous answer to the racial tensions of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>17</sup> Naomi Murakawa presents another dynamic central to the dehumanization of black people: as people began to protest for their civil rights, the government realized that they had to pass legislation to suppress what they identified as black rage.<sup>18</sup> The ruling elites defined the nature of civil rights protest as black anger and resentment of white racism, and they figured that giving these people what they wanted would stop the protests and violence.<sup>19</sup> However, the racialization of black people had transformed into a caricature of a monster that would destroy the status quo for all hard-working, white Americans. Fear tactics in conservative politics extended that caricature across the nation, helping to mobilize working class white voters to help gain a white majority for the Republican Party.<sup>20</sup> Thus, with such a solid base of voters to

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Murakawa, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Murakawa, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Murakawa, 10.

support law-and-order policies, liberal America had no problem creating a new type of prison to entrap black people. Although the Civil Rights Act granted black Americans the most basic rights they sought after for centuries, the creation of the black criminal banished them to poverty, second-class citizenship, and the system of mass incarceration.

The scholarship that builds upon the idea of criminalizing black existence illustrates a leap in the study of racial history of the United States, and also demonstrates the severity and effectiveness of dehumanization in preserving the American system of mass incarceration and racial caste. However, the majority of studies focus on a macro perspective of neoliberal aggression; this is accomplished with thorough analyses of public policy, historic American institutions, law, and political structure. The macro focus of such important academic work tends to leave behind the perspectives of the very people affected by the Carceral State, which further distances them from the awareness of society. This study aims to construct a cultural image of the carceral state, analyzing and appreciating the beauty created from a place of restriction and imprisonment from the ground level. The following sections connect prison poetry, literature, and stories of interaction with the carceral state to create an abundantly vivid reflection of the inhumanity echoed by centuries of racial precedent. Adding faces, names, stories, and humanity to the historiography of black criminalization allows for a genuine examination of the insidiousness of the American justice system.

## Part Two: The Literary Face of Prison

Black American novelists from Richard Wright to James Baldwin and Ernest T. Gaines have utilized beautifully constructed fictional accounts of black imprisonment to explore the black American experiences with the carceral state. The literature of the carceral state is especially reflective and forces one to ponder deeply the existential dilemmas that accompany

the injustice and racism faced by black people in every imaginable situation. *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines is one such book, grappling the concept of identity amid a horrifying world of dehumanization. Mr. Wiggins is a black schoolteacher who finds himself helping a man named Jefferson, who is facing execution after being convicted of a robbery turned murder; during his trial, Jefferson's defense attorney argues that he was not intelligent enough to plan the attack as, "A cornered animal to strike out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa."<sup>21</sup> Set in the rural South in the late 1940s, Jefferson is a member of a society which not only criminalizes his existence as a black man, and also disregards his humanity. To the white Southerners in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson is merely a hog with no intelligence. In trying to comfort Jefferson, Mr. Wiggins grapples with his own identity and humanity, for while he is not imprisoned and awaiting death, he is confined to his life with limitations and conditions.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* tackles themes of identity in the face of racism through the eyes of a deeply conflicted kid named Bigger. After killing two people, Bigger is on the run physically and emotionally—he does not understand the enmity he feels for white people, and he feels that he has succumbed to the stereotype white people have created for him, he was going to die.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Wright details that a case so brutal and public as that of Bigger Thomas emphasized the stereotype of the black criminal which only served to reinforce the white supremacy responsible for creating it. Bigger ultimately accepts the fate he must serve, yet the audience is left to ponder the world and society which molded him.

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<sup>21</sup> Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, (New York: Harper Perennial Publishers, 1940), 284-285.



Both *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Native Son* encapsulate the adverse search of identity, under the weight of the Jim Crow South. In creating a clear image of the life inside prison, there is an intrinsic element that accompanies their corporeal presence; being dehumanized, thrown into prison as an animal, and being classified as subhuman drives the self-reflection that the main characters delve into. The novels create for the reader an image of black men who face capital punishment for their crimes, from their own perspectives. Isolated behind bars, both Bigger Thomas and Jefferson are forced to self-evaluate and dive into introspective looks at their lives. They struggle to find an identity that is defined by themselves, as opposed to the identities formed for them both by the white ruling class and the carceral state. Though perhaps identity was never truly found, there was an eventual acceptance of the fate which quickly approached the prisoners.

Literature and poetry lend an artistic hand to the telling of life within the carceral state, and personal memoirs add unique narratives that fit within those themes, motifs, and artistic resonance. Personal stories are individualistic, pensive, and they share the intimacy and emotion of humanity. Nathan McCall, a journalist, in his coming of age story *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, details the intricacies of his upbringing and the path that led him to prison for armed robbery. In the very first chapter, he describes a white boy who was wandering through his neighborhood; as he and his friends watched this boy, an enmity festered inside them, which led to them beating him until he was unconscious.<sup>23</sup> He described feeling as though he were beating up this white kid on behalf of all blacks, in response to all the things white people had done to them.<sup>24</sup> McCall's inner battle with the complexity of racism and his identity when he was faced with this situation

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<sup>23</sup> Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> McCall, 4.

only developed as his story went on. As he moved on from his past, McCall came to the realization that he had been stuck in his own prison, he was forced into a world where people were struggling to make money, they resorted to crime, and had no way to recognize their true potential—he was stuck in a place where black men were pitted against each other.<sup>25</sup> When he escaped that world and began fulfilling his goals, he looked back upon that world with worry and fear; the young men who replaced him were “more lost and alienated than we were.”<sup>26</sup> They were trapped in the same world of crime, their lives were expendable.

In *The Autobiography of Gucci Mane*, Gucci Mane’s confrontation with criminality began while he was a young kid. Belonging to a lower class, single parent household, Gucci Mane found himself selling drugs to make ends meet in middle school; he rose above the ranks and made a name for himself, but was arrested for the first time in 2001.<sup>27</sup> After his first interaction with the law, Gucci Mane decided to pursue his music career to escape the life of drugs and crime that he was surrounded by. His career skyrocketed and Gucci Mane was at a highpoint, until he was targeted as the main suspect of a murder; he had never met or seen the man that was murdered, but his name was exploded through the media, connecting him to a violent and brutal crime.<sup>28</sup> As he sat in jail, he wrote: “My homeboys truly miss me, I know they all can feel my pain, them being victims of this system...”<sup>29</sup> After being at the height of his career, Gucci Mane faced an identity crisis when his humanity became criminalized, he was trapped in a horrifying system, and now in chains. After his time in prison, he began to reflect upon his identity and chose not to define it by the events that confined him to a cell, but with the

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<sup>25</sup> McCall, 414-415.

<sup>26</sup> McCall, 415.

<sup>27</sup> Gucci Mane, *The Autobiography of Gucci Mane*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2017), 44-45.

<sup>28</sup> Gucci Mane, 96-97.

<sup>29</sup> Gucci Mane, 102.

art he created inside of it. His story intricately lays out his coming of age in a system made to break him, yet with the exception of a few setbacks, he ascended from it and forged a new identity for himself. Both McCall and Gucci Mane represent uniquely harrowing childhoods that are reflective of the impact of prison upon the black experience; though they managed to create beauty from their adversity, they shine light upon the reality that not all have the opportunity.

As scholars like Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Naomi Murakawa, and Michele Alexander detailed in their work on black criminality, the world of mass incarceration has created undeniable barriers for the black community. The justice system itself has operated as a panopticon, with the ruling white elites at the center, surveying and exploiting people of color, while reducing their humanity to inanimation. The theme which surfaces frequently in prison literature, poetry, and memoirs is the idea of a lost identity; with their every action restricted, their bodies treated like animals, and their accomplishments shattered, there becomes a psychological prison confining their every thought and action. Through the examination of literature, poetry, and personal narratives surrounding the complexity of the carceral state, it is possible to humanize and create a cultural understanding of prison. Cultural history provides the world with human emotion, interaction, and interpretation of the system which entraps and restricts those who find themselves locked inside. Adding humanity to a system defined by inhumanity sheds light upon the insidiousness of the prison apparatus and can perhaps offer solutions for its betterment.

Prison writing as a genre is defined by a near universal set of conditions, which as Doran Larson iterates, can “provide the labor that we ask of no other citizens: the labor of bearing the

lash that the rest of us hear cracking at a distance.”<sup>30</sup> Reading and understanding the depth of prison literature is crucial in conceptualizing what can sometimes go unseen; with only one face of law-and-order made public and digestible for the public, there certainly can be no holistic comprehension of the institution. Furthermore, as Murakawa explains, it is imperative that one understands just how liberal law-and-order hides its violence—the carceral state is “an adjudicator and perpetrator of racial violence.”<sup>31</sup> Surely, one can learn a great deal about the institutional implications of the injustice of the carceral state, however, in exploring these claims from the perspectives of actual prisoners, a fuller picture can be completed.

In order to fully grasp the scholarly critique of prison as a central component of racial capitalism and liberal law-and-order, one must analyze the captivity of black people as a function of capitalist interest.<sup>32</sup> As the Civil Rights Movement illuminated the 1960s, a shift in the prison industrial complex began to occur. Prison was not a place where criminals could be rehabilitated from criminal mistakes with discipline and hard work, but rather it became a place that sought to remove people from society, take away their citizenship and personhood, and label them as criminals with the hope of defining criminality.<sup>33</sup> Prisons maintain a vested interest in dehumanizing their workforce in protection of capital; prisons are not rehabilitative centers, regardless of their advertisement as such, they are protectors of wealthy white ruling class interest. This idea is heavily opposed by prisons themselves, who uphold the popular Postbellum claim that prisons are alternatives to the violence perpetuated under slavery; this argument attaches insidious undertones of awareness and actively seeks to derail the many movements for

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<sup>30</sup> Doran Larson, “Toward a Prison Poetics,” *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (2010), 159.

<sup>31</sup> Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 155.

<sup>32</sup> Deborah McDowell, Claudrena Harold, and Juan Battle, *The Punitive Turn : New Approaches to Race and Incarceration*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 138-39.

<sup>33</sup> McDowell, 139.

prison reform.<sup>34</sup> To support scholarly studies of prison violence and injustice, literary voices from within chronicle the aspects and characteristics of the institution itself, countering the artificial façade prison perpetuates.

Written poetry in prison, when the iron fist restricts every sense of individuality and self-expression one can muster, seeps from the steel bars and into the minds and hearts of others. As W.E.B. DuBois writes, "...the spiritual striving of the freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength..."<sup>35</sup> Prison poetry, much like the fictional novels of Gaines and Wright, depicts the loss of identity and humanity when locked inside a cage. Reginald Dwayne Betts, a man who spent years in prison for a crime he committed as a young teenager, details his personal experience with the carceral state--set in the Reagan War on Drugs era—and offers a personal tale of black criminalization. In his poem "Elegy with a City in It," he describes a broken and violent system, lamenting: "Steel swallows men, spits them out black-eyed, spits them out black-balled. Reagan's curse might be real, might be what has niggas blackmailing themselves, dancing in blackface."<sup>36</sup> At the hand of conservative liberalism, black men were being filtered in and out of prison, without identity, and confined to lives of crime and destitution. Time is lost, identity is lost, and days melt together. Betts compares the era of Reagan to Armageddon, a monster whose neoconservatism condemns and kills blackness within the confines of prison.<sup>37</sup> Another famed black poet, Etheridge Knight, spent eight years in prison for robbery, and expressed his sorrow and confusion and pain through the prose of poems. In his work entitled "He Sees Through Stone," he states: "...this old black one, who under prison skies,

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<sup>34</sup> McDowell, 140.

<sup>35</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Reginald Dwayne Betts, "Elegy with A City in It," in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, (New York: Four Way Books, 2015), 11.

<sup>37</sup> Betts, 15.

sits pressed by the sun, ... the years fall, like over ripe plums, bursting red flesh, on the dark earth.”<sup>38</sup> Like Betts, Knight is stuck in a box where time passes by without him, it does not care who he is, and it stops for no one. Being trapped with no escape or identity is a barrier to freedom, which Knight and Betts try to assuage through the creation of poetry. Their words reflect the human emotions that follow their criminalization and takes the reader on a journey through their lives when they were in prison; though one may never fully comprehend the implications of mass incarceration upon the soul, poetry gives an artistic outlet which allows it to breathe outside its cell.

### Part Three: Voices from Within

As Murakawa mentions in *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*, once blackness was deemed a threat to white people that activated an extreme fear, the liberal state clenched and tightened to be tougher on crime.<sup>39</sup> Although tough-on-crime laws detailed the importance of due process and punishment only when there was a clear violation of criminal law, they ended up justifying state-sanctioned violence, disproportionately affecting minorities.<sup>40</sup> From the white ruling class idea that minorities were a threat, sprouted the functionality and systematic entrapment of prisons; these are not places for rehabilitation or growth, but are cages designed to permanently entangle individuals within the justice system. Out of the darkness of these restrictive pens, however, emerges a literary imaginary filled with beautiful and tragic portraits of the historical parallels of captivity, political theory, violence upon the black body, and consciousness and ascension.

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<sup>38</sup> Etheridge Knight, *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 148.

<sup>40</sup> Murakawa, 149.

## Slavery and Modern Prison Writing

In 1865, a Baptist minister and spokesman for former slaves named Garrison Frazier, uttered his encapsulation of the institution of chattel slavery, declaring: “Slavery is receiving by the irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent.”<sup>41</sup> Ira Berlin continues Frazier’s conceptualization of slavery by analyzing the dynamics of power which allowed it to persevere for centuries; slavery as an apparatus of white hegemony relied upon force, and the violence utilized to maintain the institution was supported and perpetuated by the state.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the goal of slavery in establishing a powerful and lucrative labor force in the hands of the wealthy few, laid the groundwork for the establishment and reconfiguration of race and class status.<sup>43</sup> The unwavering greed for a taste of the American Dream of wealth and power furthered the schism between black and white, condemning the former to lives of inferiority, captivity, and oppression. Today, although slavery was abolished a century and a half ago, the United States justice system continues to nourish the deep racial and class divides with the subsistence of state-sanctioned violence. The iron chains of chattel slavery have turned into iron bars and cement walls, but the ideals remain the same. Prisons have become a cornerstone of the American economy and their powerfully lucrative roots can be traced back to the inception of the country itself; like the rich and powerful slaveowners, businessmen view prisons as opportunities to profit from incarceration.<sup>44</sup> Considering the congruence between the dynamics of the power structure of slavery, similar parallels can be drawn from the voices of those within systems of injustice. The poetry, songs, and writings composed by slaves, former slaves, and prisoners

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<sup>41</sup> Garrison Frazier, quoted in Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Berlin, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Berlin, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2010), 230.

discuss themes of unimaginable violence, exploitation of labor, and ascension and consciousness; their voices and sentiment spotlight advances made in the scholarship of racial bias in the U.S. justice system, while showcasing the elements of empathy, perspective, and passion that scholarship lacks.

### State Violence

Violence is a fundamental capillary of power, it is calculated and insatiable, and has intensified racial and class divides in a country built upon inequality. In order to understand the motivation for state-sanctioned racialized violence, it is important to acknowledge the development of racial theory. Racism was not abolished with the eradication of slavery, rather found new ways to undermine the newfound freedom of black people and isolate them to lives of inferiority. In the opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court, in the landmark case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, Justice Taney affirms the prevailing assessment of racial hierarchy by declaring,

“[The negro] was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race.”<sup>45</sup>

Taney demonstrates the notion of widely accepted, universal racism; the practice of discrimination and inferiority based upon race was unquestioned, fashionable, and deeply ingrained in American law and society. This sentiment is echoed centuries later in modern scholarship, as the precept of inferiority has no tangible, legal obligations—it is a “state of mind and logic of the heart,” that was not established in written law, but certainly implemented as

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<sup>45</sup> *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393, 407 (1857).



commonplace.<sup>46</sup> The maintenance of this system of white hegemony, as a result, depends upon the preservation of status, which includes economic solidarity and the perpetration of violence against the black body. The writings and poetry created from within the institution of slavery and from prison transcend the time period and reflect the egregious similarities of state-sanctioned violence.

Work songs and spirituals were common expressions of resistance and religious strength in the adversity of slavery, which often echoed the regularity of violence as well as the origins of the organized policing seen today.<sup>47</sup> One such work song, entitled “Song About the Paddyrollers...” was widely known and circulated as a manifestation of fear and cautioned to avoid the armed white gangs responsible for rounding up and disciplining runaway slaves; the lyrics cry:

“Run, nigger, run,  
The paddyroll get you!  
Run, nigger, run,  
The paddyroll come!  
Watch, nigger, watch,  
The paddyroll trick you!  
Watch, nigger, watch,  
He got a big gun.”<sup>48</sup>

These paddy roller gangs were comprised of white men, hired by wealthy slave owners, to maintain their level of economic prosperity and police their slave property, thus controlling every

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<sup>46</sup> A. Leon Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>47</sup> David Spener, *We Shall Not Be Moved: Biography of a Song of Struggle* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2016), 27.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous slave, “Song About the Paddyrollers...” in Amanda Ambrose, *My Name is Black: An Anthology of Black Poets* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1973), 36.

aspect of black existence to confine them to their status as inferiors.<sup>49</sup> The song radiates the necessity for vigilance and unity amongst slaves, as collective protection from the senseless violence paddy rollers were encouraged to inflict without consequence. The establishment of policing as a means of controlling black slaves and preserving a system predicated upon the inferiority of black people, shaped the foundation of the modern police state and evolved parallel to the transition from iron chains to iron bars. Reginald Dwayne Betts, who served eight years in prison for stealing a car at the age of sixteen, constructed tragically poignant poetry which exemplifies the brutality of the police state in the modern black community.<sup>50</sup> He writes:

“When they found his body today,  
all forty-seven of his years drowned  
in a pool he paid for with blood, I thought  
of my brother. He has life. The police cracked  
Rodney King’s head open before a live  
audience...  
They say King had 59 fractures, bones brittle  
brittle after that night when he became  
why every young dude I knew shouted ‘Fuck  
the Police.’ We only cursed what could kill us...”<sup>51</sup>

Echoing the law-and-order policies of a neoliberal state, Betts paints a horrifying picture of brutality, emanating a conscious fear analogous to the work song cautioning slaves. The beating of Rodney King precipitated an era of outrage and activism from within the black community; a

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<sup>49</sup> Victor E. Kappeler, “A Brief History of Slavery and the Origins of American Policing,” *Eastern Kentucky University Police Studies Online* (2014), 1.

<sup>50</sup> Elisa Gonzalez, “A Decade After Prison, a Poet Studies for the Bar Exam,” (New York: New Yorker Magazine, 2016), 1.

<sup>51</sup> Reginald Dwayne Betts, “Crimson,” in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, (New York: Four Way Books, 2015), 31.

witness to the assault recalls the sounds of the beating after King stopped screaming, "...all you could hear was like bones being broken, a crunching, like a whip sound."<sup>52</sup> This case placed a national spotlight upon the racial violence perpetrated by the Los Angeles Police Department, as it became an example of paddy roller violence, free from consequence.

As Ben Brucato highlights, in his article entitled "Fabricating the Color Line in a White Democracy: From Slave Catchers to Petty Sovereigns," mass incarceration of people of color and the lack of indictments for incidents of police brutality, despite the "color-blindness" of policy, hinges upon the intimacy of the relationship between the U.S. state and the police.<sup>53</sup> This system continues to persevere and drive profits into the hands of the ancestors of wealthy slave owners, violently tearing the hope of justice and equality from the existence of black people. When illustrating the unfolding case of Rodney King, Betts recalls the moment he saw the news unfolding on television: "we saw King, & thought him Chris, my brother, slumped under batons & boots, under the cops' blows."<sup>54</sup> The fear of his unknowing glare into the blinding television demonstrates a formation of unity in the midst of sheer terror; as slaves sang in worried choruses to resist the violent gang of police, their voices diffused solidarity in the hope for freedom from tyranny.

State-sanctioned violence has a long history in the United States, closely related to the relationship between the power of polity and police. Scholarship often conveys the marriage between the two, acknowledging broad consequences, while glossing over the perspective and passion of the voices captive inside. The voices of slaves in song and of Reginald Dwayne Betts

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<sup>52</sup> Seth Mydans, "Friend Relives Night of Police Beating," (New York: The New York Times, 1991), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ben Brucato, "Fabricating the Color Line in a White Democracy: From Slave Catchers to Petty Sovereigns," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 61, no. 141 (2014), 31.

<sup>54</sup> Betts, 32.

are only small brushstrokes on thousands of pieces of art that convey the consistency of aspects of black existence in America; they add consciousness and ascension that transcend the corporeal confinement to which they are bound.

### Prison Poetry and Consciousness

Henry Lucas, a black prisoner in Florida State Prison in 1976<sup>55</sup>, constructed tragically beautiful poetry, filled with frustration, confusion, and a consciousness that separates his words from his corporeal prison. Prisoners of Florida State Prison were not allowed to possess their own typewriters, so everything they wanted to produce, whether it took the form of flowing prose or appeals to the state, had to be written by hand; Lucas, operating under the pseudonym *eusi profile*, funneled his anger and consciousness with hand-written notes on raggedy paper.<sup>56</sup> The state holds a vested interest both in stifling the creativity of those they keep trapped in their iron jaws, as well as preventing the dream of freedom and justice from entering their conscience. Prisons are well-controlled, state structures that are designed to confine the corporeal being to a limited space; one who is imprisoned cannot move beyond these physical barriers, as they are a tool of separation from “law-abiding society.”<sup>57</sup>

The emergence of awareness and ascension from physical prisons is universal in prison writing and poetry, which is representative of the creative limitations of prison and spotlights the desire to move beyond barriers with thought and prose. With the powerful vessel of writing, prisoners reach out to “law-abiding society,” exposing the oppressive practices and institutions of the polity, and creating a cultural unity which seeks to transcend the carceral state.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Henry Lucas, in *Prose and Cons*, (New York: Pyramid Communications, Inc., 1976), 145.

<sup>56</sup> Lucas, 145.

<sup>57</sup> Doran Larson, “Toward a Prison Poetics,” *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (2010), 144.

<sup>58</sup> Larson, 144.

Furthermore, the state actively seeks to suppress expressiveness and innovation, as it “reveals a rich texture of community, culture, and history in the struggle for education and self-determination.”<sup>59</sup> The beauty and sophistication of prose unveils centuries of pain and injustice, blowing holes in the institutions defined by a distinct binary of right and wrong, law and order, and shedding light upon the culture of oppression and consciousness.

Slave spirituals depicted the adversity of life as a slave and called upon the theme of ascension to acknowledge God and the symbolic journey to paradise. Another slave song, credited to Millie Williams, conveys the egregiousness of this dichotomy of superior and inferior, high and low, good and evil. She sings:

“Massa sleeps in the feather bed,  
Nigger sleeps on the floor;  
When we get to heaven  
There’ll be slaves no more.”<sup>60</sup>

The imagery connotes a representation of the binary which is often adhered to in the preservation of white ruling authority. This phenomenon can be traced to the origins of the slave trade, exemplified with biblical interpretation by the English of the justifications for blackness or difference in skin color. Blackness, in Christian theology, epitomized malevolence and sin, which became a moral justification for the slave trade, and furthered the development of a universalized conceptualization of racism and white superiority that developed over centuries.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Vonzell Agosto, “Intertextualities: The Poetics of the Freedom Schools,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 77, no. 2 (2008), 168.

<sup>60</sup> Maisie Williams, “Song,” in Amanda Ambrose, *My Name is Black: An Anthology of Black Poets* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1973), 37.

<sup>61</sup> Betty Wood, *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 23.

In addition to the symbolic inferiority attached to sleeping on the floor, the theme of ascension shines brightly through, as a ray of hope and a taste of resistance that encourages persistence in the face of suffering.

The ascension theme, common in slave narratives and captivating writing in general, grip and fascinate the reader, as the protagonist is developing into something new; they rise from the despair and uncertainty of adversity to a higher plane of life.<sup>62</sup> The ascension in Williams's song, though somewhat melancholy, exemplifies the ultimate ascension—to the gates of paradise. Furthermore, the ascension motif draws connection with African mythology and culture, keeping the culture slaves were stolen away from close. The flying myths, wherein slaves would fly up and away from this chained existence and back to the lands of their ancestors, were quite common in culture.<sup>63</sup> Thus, ascension has a large hold upon the poetry, songs, and writing during slavery; however, over time, ascension proved to transcend the workings of slavery and trickle into modern prison poetry as a reiteration of the adversity of black prisoners.

In his poem entitled "de trip," Henry Lucas emphasizes the questions of consciousness that are forced upon him by the incessant injustice he faces as a black man in prison; this injustice is not unilateral, but is complex and unwaveringly affects every aspect of his existence. He writes: "...questions/incessantly flashin/thru my black awareness, ticktocktickin questions/dat threaten to Xplode my consciousness, because I cannot reason ah universal answer for them..."<sup>64</sup> Trapped within the iron and cement wilderness, Lucas struggles for self-awareness, emanating an apprehension that transcends physical barriers and contemplates the existential

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<sup>62</sup> David Blight, "Fugitive Slaves and Northern Racism," *Africans in America* (PBS.org, 1999), 1.

<sup>63</sup> Katherine Thorsteinson, "From Escape to Ascension: The Effects of Aviation Technology on the Flying African Myth," *Criticism* 57, no. 2 (2015), 259.

<sup>64</sup> Lucas, 155.

crisis of a black man stuck in dehumanizing chaos. This question is framed by race—Lucas is only able to escape the reality of prison with his thoughts and awareness, yet he cannot summon a reason or a purpose, as it has been suffocated by his reality. He continues, “...searchin my wearied mind for de dawn of life, desperately reachin out to grasp who am I, theories/debatable beliefs Xist/ about de origin of life, but i find no solace in any of them.”<sup>65</sup> Grasping for humanity whilst behind bars framed by inhumanity is “de trip” of Henry Lucas; the quenching of his thirst for absolute liberation is not possible, so he seeks answers with a self-determined movement of consciousness.

As he strives for clarity, and writes his thoughts upon raggedy scraps of paper, the answers scream back at him: his self-discovery is being smothered by the ruling regime of racism. “[U]ncertainly i try to rise to my feet, but i feel de monstrous white hands, of white injustice/ of white hate/ of white lies, cruelly pressin against my dark body, bigotedly pinnin me to ah bed of oppression.”<sup>66</sup> The racial bias Lucas describes within prison reflects the pain and hatred inflicted upon the black body as a representation of the precept of inferiority.<sup>67</sup> He is pinned literally and figuratively, confined to his space at the bottom, and prevented from rising above the injustice perpetrated by a white ruling class. Additionally, his metaphor about being pinned produces a restrictive binary in which gender identity, sexuality, and consciousness are all considered and contemplated within the boundaries of their locality; there is no freedom of exploration or liberation, the rules are designed to suffocate.

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<sup>65</sup> Lucas, 155.

<sup>66</sup> Lucas, 155.

<sup>67</sup> A. Leon Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.

Not only is Lucas confined within the walls of prison, he is burdened by the thought and reality of white injustice that plagues his every day existence; was he destined to confinement? What does his consciousness mean if it is not heard? Lucas discusses trying to rise up on his feet and stretch out both his physical body and his spiritual actuality, and he feels the hands of white injustice and power around his neck.<sup>68</sup> He cannot move freely, he cannot feel whole, and he cannot breathe fresh air without confronting the whiteness his blackness is bound to—in order to free his consciousness from the cage his physical being is contained within, he realizes that one must first resist the power he is locked within.

The idea of ascending the physical barriers of prison and creating consciousness through the written word is a cultural response to the disproportionate oppression of the carceral state. Lucas's poem continues to describe this ascension of consciousness: "& my consciousness climbs higher- higher-HIGHER, trippin toward de beginnin/ de wisdom of life, light/ spectrums of lights/ bathe my black awareness..."<sup>69</sup>

He dreams of his existence as a spiritual entity away from the white hands of brutality and creates an imaginary which considers his existence free from oppression and indignity. With his sanguine sentiment, Lucas draws congruence to the ascent narratives of slavery, in which slaves sought to ascend from the oppressive social structure that limited their existence, and travel to the less repressive utopian North.<sup>70</sup> He ponders his existence as every white man has the freedom to—he grasps the music, the wisdom, the understanding, and the passion that is unavailable to him and lives within a pleasant reverie, illustrating the beauty of imagination.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lucas, 155.

<sup>69</sup> Lucas, 156.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 167.

<sup>71</sup> Lucas, 156.



The wonder of utopia is suddenly ripped from his mind and hand, as he tragically details: "...O/ my freed consciousness, i feel it descendin once more, fallin back into my enslaved black flesh, snatched out of de rejuvenatin abyss of peace, by de fouled hands of white madness, back to de gloomy cage..."<sup>72</sup> As he reminisces the idyllic utopia of freedom, his dream is caught in the allusion to slavery and the reality of his existence as a black man in prison; parallels between slavery and black existence in prison are present in many works of prison poetry, which emphasizes the oppressive nature of the institution. The ability to separate consciousness from physical reality whilst confined within an iron and concrete wilderness creates exquisitely poignant art and prose, yet it illustrates the grievous reality of the carceral state. Lucas is one of many black men who have been sucked into this abyss, and his poetry exemplifies the forced cultural creation as a response to black imprisonment.

### Exploitation

As explored in the section on violence, a crucial aspect of both slavery and the modern prison industrial complex is the relationship between the state and the system of policing; thus, comes an inherently exploitative connection between the maintenance of the ruling class and the function of prisoners. The same system which kept former slaves trapped in the prison system after its abolition in 1865, still exists today, and although it has morphed and evolved to adapt to modern conditions, its jaws are still firmly clamped down on the black community. After the Civil War ended, the thirteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, abolishing slavery. It reads:

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<sup>72</sup> Lucas, 156.

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”<sup>73</sup>

Additionally, the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments provided former slaves with citizenship and, for males, the right to vote, which was a step towards freedom and reparations for centuries of injustice.<sup>74</sup> However, much of the ruling class abhorred the advancements that black people were now allowed to make, and sought to undermine the process of Reconstruction and find new ways to subjugate blacks to the inferiority they retained during slavery. This took the form of racialized violence: the inception of the Ku Klux Klan, bombings, lynchings, public displays of delinquency; this campaign of terror reigned triumphant, especially in the South, which caused the federal government to mitigate the passing of civil rights legislation.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the clause in the thirteenth amendment that authorizes slavery as punishment for a crime emerged as a potential loophole to imprison black people for meaningless offenses, which would return the nation to slavery, but with a different name. As Michelle Alexander details, the force of the law enforcement community came down hard on the black community, arresting folks for “insulting gestures” and “mischief,” which would require these people to pay a fine or serve as laborers until their fine was paid.<sup>76</sup> This inherently exploitative practice provided large corporations with free labor, while cementing the entanglement between the police and the interests of the ruling class.

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<sup>73</sup> U.S. Constitution, Amendment XIII, 1865.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Constitution, Amendments XIV and XV, 1865.

<sup>75</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2010), 30-31.

<sup>76</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2010), 31.

The scholarship on this theme of unrelenting injustice can be supported by the people who saw and experienced it daily with their own eyes. Poems, songs, and works of art from the days of peonage and convict leasing, even continued into the modern prison system, all reflect similarities in identity and experience that showcases the corruption and brutality of the prison world. In the poem entitled “Justice,” by Langston Hughes, he writes:

“That Justice is a blind goddess  
Is a thing to which we black are wise:  
Her bandage hides two festering sores  
That once, perhaps, were eyes.”<sup>77</sup>

This poem indicates the connection between the black community and injustice. By emphasizing the blindness of the goddess Justice, he maintains that the truth is there and that it is real, it is just unseen by those who are in charge of administering it. He continues the poem in a rational tone to describe the exploitation and disregard for his community by emphasizing the “festering sores,” and the nonexistent capacity to see injustice which perhaps relays a cynicism for a system of change.<sup>78</sup> This poem denotes the extent to which the black community is exploited in the name of so-called “justice,” and relays a consciousness that brings awareness to the ways that themes of slavery continued to exist even after it was abolished. The continuous injustice and exploitation Hughes portrays under the eyes of the law can be exemplified both in modern scholarship of the carceral state, and with poems and creations that come from the inside.

As with convict leasing in the Postbellum era, labor in prison is often exploitative; the conditions are much different, due to the illegality of convict leasing today, however inmates are

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<sup>77</sup> Langston Hughes, “Justice,” in Dudley Randall, *The Black Poets*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 87.

<sup>78</sup> Langston Hughes, “Justice,” in Dudley Randall, *The Black Poets*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 87.

often paid for their services well under minimum wage.<sup>79</sup> These wages are often put into an account that keeps track of their incarceration, but it is very common for these accounts to be charged with fees and extraneous expenses that prevents them from saving the money that they have earned from hard work.<sup>80</sup> In this untitled poem by an anonymous Californian prisoner, whose identity was censored for their own protection in prison, the manipulation of prison laborers is shockingly apparent. They write:

“To the wealth owners land  
Across the Rio Grand  
And there the green goes  
To chase away the runaway  
Of the cheap labor state.  
Uncle Sam the keeper of slaves  
Will resort to reform  
This immigrant outbreak  
So stay away, keep away they say  
And accept the American way.”<sup>81</sup>

The world this poem illustrates is one wherein the laborer is a nameless number, of little importance to the state, and whose labor will continue to be exploited at very little cost to Uncle Sam. According to the prisoner, this is the true American Dream; the utopian construction of hard work building one a safe home and great job for their family is made of glass. The real image is not idyllic, but manipulative and builds itself upon the backs of those who cannot escape its wiles. The United States has a deeply entangled and complex relationship with the

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<sup>79</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2010), 157.

<sup>80</sup> Alexander, 157.

<sup>81</sup> Anonymous, “Untitled poem,” (MIM by prisoners, prisonercensorship.info, 2005), 1.

police state, or the justice system. Once framed by a slave labor force, the abrupt and contentious end to slavery provided complications for a reformation of the system free from injustice; consequently, a system of justice free from the violence and exploitation of peoples of color does not exist.

### Political Poetry and Institutions

Henry Lucas, a man imprisoned in Florida State Prison, reflects upon the institution of prison and destroys the notion of prisons as centers for rehabilitation and treats them as a trap for black men like himself. He observes:

“if de pigs don’t waste me/i comin back  
cause ya see jack/i aint changed one bit  
i faked my way through that rehabilitation shit  
no amount of fancy white rap can justify  
de why of me bein a capitalistic slave...  
hard work alone never made nobody rich  
&never made nobody free  
whitey beennnn hip to de shit  
dat why he be lyin/stealin & killin thru-out history.”<sup>82</sup>

To Lucas, there is no answer as to why he is stuck as a cog in the wheels on injustice, but it is tremendously clear to him that his experience is a product both of history and of capitalism. He acknowledges a sort of separation between him and society, as prisons are designed to be separating spaces that the law abiding society does not interact with or is even aware of; they are invisible.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Henry Lucas, “when i round,” in *Prose and Cons*, (New York: Pyramid Communications, Inc., 1976), 160.

<sup>83</sup> Brett Story, *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power across Neoliberal America*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 167.

As Brett Story outlines in *Prison Land*, the process of reification associated with the public view of the carceral state has become nearly inexorably cemented into the facets of society; people do not view prisons as complex and powerful institutions with a strong entanglement in public policy, and they do not understand the intricate social implications of captivity.<sup>84</sup> Prisons, in the public eye, are often not expanded in thought to represent more than their physical nature, thus both prisons and their hostages are objects in a phenomenon much larger than themselves. The problem of reification not only complicates prison advocacy and reform, it makes them nearly impossible. Without a change in social circumstance and mindset to overturn the dehumanization and neglect, prison reform movements will prove largely unsuccessful. However, the world is not without hope. As Naomi Madgett writes in her poem entitled “Alabama Centennial,”

“Not all the dogs and hoses in Birmingham  
Nor all the clubs and guns in Selma  
Can turn this tide.  
Not all the jails can hold these black faces  
From their destiny of manhood,  
Of equality, of dignity,  
Of the American Dream  
A hundred years past due.  
Now!”<sup>85</sup>

Written at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., Madgett encompasses the ascension, consciousness, and hope for social change that defines campaigns for prison reform. The fight for justice and power for black Americans in the midst of mass incarceration and

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<sup>84</sup> Story, 168.

<sup>85</sup> Naomi Madgett, “Alabama Centennial,” in Dudley Randall, *The Black Poets*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 198.

appalling oppression seeks to transcend both the black body and the political boundaries of confinement. A crucial component of tearing apart historically racist institutions is breaking the reification and the separation of real people from rest of the so-called 'law-abiding' world. As Lucas, Betts, and many other black poets locked behind bars have iterated, consciousness and rage and passion create something that expands consciousness beyond the corporeal being. Writing beautiful prose that illustrates real life inside an exploitative state not only adds to Carceral scholarship, but also slowly expands the geopolitical spaces between two vastly different worlds.

#### Part Four: Conclusion

Like the hopeful ring of promise from the pen of Naomi Madgett, carceral state scholarship seeks to find solutions to reform the system which entraps and condemns blackness in the United States. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the world's most famous faces of civil rights and nonviolent civil disobedience, called for a radical human rights movement that sought to reconstruct society, devoid of the insidious racial divides; however, in the words of Michelle Alexander: "Change in civil rights organizations, like change in society as a whole, will not come easy."<sup>86</sup> The long standing tradition of reification, separation, and dehumanization of prisons, in the eyes of a society deeply entrenched in criminalizing people of color, create barriers for activism that seek to undermine the success of any movement for reform; compiling, listening to, and understanding the words and thoughts of the people who are stuck in their own criminalization becomes a way to slowly connect their experiences with the world from which they are purposely cut off.

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<sup>86</sup> Alexander, 260.

As Khalil Gibran Muhammad analyzes, the academic world of criminology and carceral history have long been rooted in racism—even throughout the twentieth century, equating blackness with an increased aptitude for committing crime was not viewed as flagrant racism, but rather worked as functional theory alongside the neoliberal “law-and-order” complex.<sup>87</sup> This complex and entangled relationship between the white ruling class state, the police force rooted in racial prejudice, and academia, created a panopticon that restricts the existence of black people in the United States, and for many, forces interaction with the carceral state. The goal of building a cultural and literary imaginary has been to explore the aforementioned interaction with an approach that differs from the top-down perspective, analyzing instead the voices of prisoners themselves to add humanity and compassion to an adverse and persisting issue.

The analysis of poetry, literature, and art from within the carceral state is so important because each work reflects the gravity and the humanity that is often lacking in scholarship. These poignant and tragic works of consciousness demonstrate the persistence of the necessity to reform, despite every attempt made to dehumanize and degrade black existence. Despite this reification and separation of prisons from the rest of the world, they are places teeming with culture, social interaction, and transformations that are crises begging for radical systematic change.<sup>88</sup> The future of the carceral state is at a critical point; the antagonistic neoliberal policies of the past still reign supreme, yet movements like Black Lives Matter seek to accomplish what was left unfinished during the Civil Rights Movement. Campaigns for social justice, like Black Lives Matter, are characterized by the strength and passion of collective voices; some voices are trapped inside, many others are outside, and some have been forever silenced by the state, but the

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<sup>87</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 276-277.

<sup>88</sup> Brett Story, *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power across Neoliberal America*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 182.



interaction and unity of people based upon shared experience is a powerful connection that slowly repairs the divides created by aggressive neoliberalism. The utilization of the written word to create an imaginary rich in literature and culture displays not only a companion to the critical advancements in the academic precedent of the carceral state, but also reveals the devastating humanity condemned to predetermined fate, as well as the insidiousness and the cunning of a traditional American institution. Without the voices, the thoughts, the emotions, and the perspectives of real people, the scholarship of the carceral state would travel parallel to the reification of neoliberalism and stray farther from any possible tangible change.

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